

In the Claims:

1. (original) A method for processing information relating to usage of a utility, the method comprising:

receiving a utility reading, the utility reading being a measure of the usage of the utility by a customer, wherein the utility reading is received from a first remote location across a first transmission medium;

determining an amount, wherein the amount is determined using the utility reading; and transmitting the amount to a second remote location, the amount being transmitted to the second remote location across a second transmission medium, wherein the second remote location is arranged to effect a payment of the amount by the customer.

2. (original) A method as recited in claim 1 wherein the first transmission medium is one selected from the group consisting of a network communications line, a fiberoptic line, and a telephone line.

3. (original) A method as recited in claim 1 wherein the second transmission medium is one selected from the group consisting of a network communications line, a fiberoptic line, and a telephone line.

4. (original) A method as recited in claim 1 wherein the utility reading is received from a smart meter, the method further including receiving address information associated with a location of the smart meter.

5. (original) A method as recited in claim 4 further including receiving a unit code, the unit code being arranged to identify the units associated with the utility reading.

6. (currently amended) A method as recited in claim 1 wherein transmitting the amount to the second remote location across a second transmission medium includes transmitting the amount across a global telecommunications network, the global telecommunications network being arranged to **substantially** perform clearance and settlement transactions.

7. (original) A method as recited in claim 6 further including generating a credit message using the amount, wherein transmitting the amount to the second remote location includes transmitting the credit message to the second remote location.

8. (original) A method as recited in claim 6 further including generating a debit message using the amount, wherein transmitting the amount to the second remote location includes transmitting the debit message to the second remote location.

9. (cancelled)

10. (currently amended) A method for providing information relating to usage of a utility, the information being provided from a utility meter to a processing center associated with the utility, the method comprising:

electronically obtaining a reading from the utility meter, the reading being indicative of the usage of the utility;

generating a utility message, the utility message including the reading; and

transmitting the utility message to the processing center, the processing center being arranged to **substantially** initiate **at least one of** a credit transaction **and or** a debit transaction for payment for the usage of the utility, wherein the utility message is transmitted across a transmission medium.

11. (original) A method as recited in claim 10 wherein the transmission medium is one of a network communications line and a telephone line.

12. (original) A method as recited in claim 10 wherein electronically obtaining the reading from the utility meter includes electronically reading the reading from the utility meter.

13. (original) A method as recited in claim 10 further including configuring the utility meter, wherein configuring the utility meter includes entering one of a credit account number and a debit account number into the utility meter.

14. (original) A method as recited in claim 10 wherein generating the utility message includes:

creating a first message field, the first message field including the utility reading;

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creating a second message field, the second message field including one of a credit account number and a debit account number; and

creating a third message field, the third message field including information associated with a unit of measure for the utility reading.

15. (cancelled)

16. (cancelled)

17. (currently amended) An apparatus for monitoring the usage of a utility, the apparatus comprising:

an electronic meter reader, wherein the electronic meter reader is arranged to electronically obtain meter counts associated the usage of the utility;

a processor-memory unit, the processor-memory unit being coupled to the electronic meter reader, the processor-memory unit being arranged to process and to store information relating to the usage of the utility, wherein the information includes the meter counts obtained from the electronic meter reader; and

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a connection mechanism communication device, the connection mechanism being coupled to the processor-memory unit, wherein the connection mechanism communication device is arranged to allow the processor-memory unit to transmit the processed information to a substantially remote receiving device;

wherein the connection mechanism communication device is further arranged to send the message to the substantially remote receiving device.

18. (currently amended) An apparatus as recited in claim 17 wherein the connection mechanism communication device is one of a modem, and an internet connection mechanism device or a computer.

19. (currently amended) An apparatus as recited in claim 17, further comprising an input device configured to permit one of a credit account number and or a debit account number to be input into the apparatus.

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20. (currently amended) A system for processing a utility usage transaction, the system comprising:

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a utility ~~metering mechanism~~ meter, the utility ~~metering mechanism~~ being arranged to generate a measure of usage of a utility; **and**

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a processing center mechanism, the ~~processing mechanism~~ being arranged to receive the measure of the utility from the utility metering mechanism, the processing ~~mechanism~~ center further being arranged to effect ~~at least one of~~ a credit transaction **and** or a debit transaction associated with the measure of the utility, ~~wherein the utility metering mechanism is further arranged to transmit the measure of the usage of the utility to the processing mechanism whereby said utility usage transaction is processed automatically;~~ **and**
a communication device arranged to transmit the measure of usage to the processing center.

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21 - 28 (cancelled)

29. (new) A method as recited in claim 1 wherein the utility is electricity, water or gas.

30. (new) A method as recited in claim 10 wherein the utility is electricity, water or gas.

31. (new) A method as recited in claim 17 wherein the utility is electricity, water or gas.

32. (new) A method as recited in claim 20 wherein the utility is electricity, water or gas.
